

Studying Edward Scissorhands

Tim Burton really unleashed his imagination for the first time when he made the pop fairytale Edward Scissorhands in 1990. Just as Burton's success is associated with Batman, his artistic reputation is inextricably linked to Edward Scissorhands. Modern narratives are often updated versions of timeless stories. Edward Scissorhands adapts the structure and conventions of the European fairytale to a contemporary American, suburban setting.

Clips mentioned in this section are not available to view on the website but are readily available to buy or rent from the usual outlets.

The film can be read as a dark, romantic fable for adults, another take on the disparity between the individual and society, on the unique nature of one single character and the horror of conformity. The Frankenstein story provides the model here.

'A monster with a heart' was one of the central themes of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, with an emphasis on sympathy, and intellectual and emotional identification particularly characteristic of English Romanticism. Edward Scissorhands takes up this tradition in so far as the creature becomes an object of sympathy and makes the world around him appear monstrous in comparison with his own innate goodness.

Burton sets his story in a contemporary American suburb. He has given each generation represented in Edward Scissorhands its own system of symbolic shorthand representing the different eras they grew up in, different times associated with different tastes, each expressing a particular aesthetic. The parents generation is characterised by familiar 50s and 60s icons; the conformist, consumer-led boom of those years represented by lava lamps, functional interiors and social rituals like the barbecue.

The younger generation wears the insignia of the 80s: jeans, T-shirts and the dream of fast money symbolised by a Landrover decorated with flames, all very reminiscent of the familiar aesthetics of Slacker films. Ultimately Edward represents two apparently disparate cultures. His clothes – a tight black leather suit with metal accessories – look like the rebellious uniform of punk, whose 'no future' attitude and rejection of bourgeois society were actually directly descended from the self-isolation and self-obsession of the Romantics as embodied in our lonely, misunderstood hero.

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Edward Scissorhands (1990) The town and the mansion: (00:05:06 to 00:14:28)

There are two distinct locations in the film: Edward's home in the mansion on the hill and the town which it overlooks. While they are very different places, they are similar in the exaggerated fashion in which each is presented. The gothic style mansion with its forbidding exterior, decorated by monstrous stone carvings, and its huge cavernous interior, lit only by long spindly windows, is the archetypal haunted house of the fairytale or Hammer horror. It is also reminiscent of many of the films sets of German Expressionism.

By contrast the town at the foot of the hill is a pretty, peaceful, traditionally ordered society (men go to work each day, women are housewives) as represented in American TV shows of the 1960s such as the Brady Bunch and Bewitched.

The contrast between the two locations is established in this sequence. The lush, colourful landscaped garden of the inventor's castle filled with flowers contrasts greatly with the flat unimaginative lawns which form a neat little pattern in the town below. The film set for the mansion is very dramatic, with windows and arches all slightly askew, adding to the feeling that not everything is as it should be. Peg, the Avon Lady's entrance to the house is framed by a long shot which shows her suddenly engulfed by a huge bare interior. However, her vulnerability is counteracted by her inappropriate comments while exploring this chilling environment; "This is some huge house. Thank goodness for those aerobics classes." The cheery lilac figure, climbing the stairs of a huge gothic house, is completely out of place. The music, which has been warning us of imminent danger, reaches a climax as Peg tells the dark approaching figure: "I'm Peg Boggs..your local Avon representative."

It is only when Edward emerges from the dark that Peg feels afraid, but is soon reassured when he speaks. The music changes sharply at this point into something a little more melancholic as a stunned Peg looks at Edward's hands and asks him what has happened. Again the mood quickly changes to optimism as she begins to heal the cuts on his face.

Edward Scissorhands (1990) The Barbecue Scene: (00:34:03 to 00:34:57)

Edward Scissorhands (1990) The Television Interview: (00:52:25 to 00:54:26)

Edward Scissorhands (1990) The Diner Scene: (00:57:43 to 00:58:47)

These three sequences illustrate the bold use of primary colours in Tim Burton's mise-en-scene. The vibrant colour scheme conveys the emotional excess and unstable behaviour of the inhabitants of the town. The contrast with Edward's gothic punk style of clothing, hairstyle and make-up is striking and it marks him out as an outsider – a fish out of water.

Edward Scissorhands (1990) The Ice Sculpture: (01:12:45 to 01:14:20)

In *Edward Scissorhands*, as in many German Expressionist films, realism is rejected in favour of artificiality which adds to the fairytale quality of the film. In this scene, the dream-like atmosphere of a romantic fairytale is evoked by the strong use of the colour white; the slow motion cinematography of the falling snowflakes (like a glass snowball); and the haunting music of composer Danny Elfman. Elfman has written the score for every Tim Burton film and his music perfectly expresses the kind fantasy world with menacing undertones that Burton aims to create in his work.

Edward Scissorhands (1990) The Death of the Inventor: (01:21:27 to 01:23:06)

In this sequence, Tim Burton's mise-en-scene brilliantly conveys the strange world of the inventor that we are familiar with from the horror genre. However, the director's intention is to subvert genre expectations. For this dark gothic interior, drained of life and colour, does not house an evil force or wicked character.